

FEAR IN THE AFTERNOON

By John Burnham Schwartz

(published in *GQ*, July 2002)

If you want to know the real history of the world, it's been said, talk not to the general or the king, but to the cook, the butler, the barkeep. Allow me to suggest another humble candidate: the best man. Yes, the best man. That ever-present, anxiously smiling, perpetually toasting figure, dressed handsomely though never quite as handsomely as the groom, whose fate in narrative terms remains opaque, yet whose story, I believe, is nonetheless worthy of attention.

I should know. In the last ten years I've been a best man five times. Actually, my first summons to best-manhood – by my old friend Jonathan, who was marrying my old friend Lisa – was a disaster. I was unable to show up. This is the worst thing that can happen to a best man (it's not so great for the groom, either). The story of that failure involves a suspected brain tumor, leaking spinal fluid, and an inability to raise myself to a vertical position. I can't wait to tell it. But I have trained myself in the art of literary restraint; melodrama and narcissism are my sworn enemies. So I will reverse the normal order of things and instead give a temperate, objective account of my most recent stint as a best man – last March in Spain, where I almost died in a bull ring.

Josh and I, friends since college, had both lived in Paris for a couple of years in our mid-twenties. Despite a few notable differences in our day-to-day lives – he had a high-paying job with Warner Brothers and a nice flat in

the Marais, while I was a published but unemployed writer with a tiny place in the 5th – we spent a lot of time together. In short, ours was one of those deeply satisfying rare friendships between men in which nothing seemed outside the purview of conversation and yet no single thought ever got finished (except, perhaps, the one concerning the woman who was sleeping with us both). And a good thing it is too, to be able to talk with such ease, now that Josh is married and I am in therapeutic recovery from being his best man in a beautiful insane country in which belligerent bulls are allowed – no, encouraged – to charge after innocent foreigners who wish for nothing more than the never-ending happiness of their beloved friends.

Not that I'm complaining. I love Josh and his wife Christine as much as it is possible to love your friends. And as weddings go, theirs was glorious. Two hundred people traveled from all across Europe and America just to celebrate their union in Ronda, a picturesque town built on the rim of a deep gorge in southwest Spain. Josh is something of a celebrity in Ronda because of his warm connection with the town's most illustrious son, the late great bullfighter Antonio Ordóñez. A surprising friendship, I suppose – the charming, media-savvy young Jew from Beverly Hills and the aging Spanish god who had been pals with Hemingway, Picasso, and Orson Welles and who is the only bullfighter ever inducted into Spain's *Instituto De Bellas Artes* (his fighting style was deemed a work of art). It was to Ronda that Josh had brought Christine on their first romantic getaway, a magical time during which Ordóñez himself gave the couple his blessing not long before he died of cancer.

I mention all this because, my doctors assure me, it is a proven technique in the post-best man recovery process to try to draw a line of reason back through the chain of traumatic events. To ask yourself probing questions: Why Ronda? Why bullfighting? Have I not always been a good friend, kind to animals and old people?

Of course, there had been signs that this wasn't going to be the usual sort of best man job. Ronda, in addition to the magisterial Ordonez (himself from a long line of celebrated bullfighters, nearly all of whom were gored or trampled to death), is famous for having one of the oldest and most beautiful bull rings in Spain. And Josh, who had spent five years working for Warner Brothers in Madrid and speaks perfect Spanish, was an avid fan of the bloody ballet known as *Tauromaquia*. He knew the history, the moves, the magic. He had, how shall I put it, fantasies.

Now, managing the fantasy life of your old friend in the weeks leading up to his wedding is, or ought to be, the best man's singular purpose. So I should have been on my guard when minutes after asking me if I would be his best man and receiving my immediate assent, Josh mentioned that the wedding would be in Ronda and that, on the day following the ceremony, he hoped to arrange a little bullfighting for himself, me, and anyone else who wanted to participate. Wouldn't that be something?

My wife, Aleksandra, and I arrived in Ronda a couple of days before the wedding. In a downpour we drove slowly past the rounded khaki-colored facade of the bull ring with statues of the town's two most famous matadors (Ordonez and his father, I would soon learn) out front. Even in bronze, I thought, their clothes looked uncomfortably tight.

Josh and Christine and their families were already ensconced at the Parador, an elegant hotel built at the edge of the vertiginous gorge that separates the older and newer sections of Ronda. The newlyweds-to-be looked terrific, slim and radiant with pre-nuptial stress. At the first opportunity I took Josh aside and whispered a few words of what I imagined was an exceptionally calming pep talk, wanting him to know that I was an old hand at weddings and not to worry about anything. In deference to my role as *consigliere*, I suppressed the urge to raise the bullfighting question. As

it was, Josh seemed mostly concerned about the weather – if the rain continued, he said, they might have to move the ceremony indoors. If the rain continues, I wanted to say, then we won't all have to die in a fucking bull ring, will we?

Let's call this my Spanish Period, when every meal began to feel conceivably like a last supper. Of those rainy days leading up to the wedding I have the fondest memories. Josh and I were as calm, more or less, as the highest grade psycho-pharmaceuticals could make us. I didn't even mind having to sit through a second bachelor party for him, at a restaurant decorated with bullfighting memorabilia called Pedro Romero's.

And I met some of the locals, including the ex-mayor and his wife, and a very old man called "El Cronista" ("the Chronicler") who gave me, in Spanish, a fascinating historical tour of the town, even though I don't speak Spanish. What about this bullfighting business? I wanted to demand, while the Cronista went on telling me (I think) about why the buildings in that part of Spain were all white. (I can't remember.)

In short, to quote that great American matador Woody Allen, the heady seventy-two hours leading up to my dear friend's nuptials were nothing that Prozac and a polo mallet couldn't cure. Which is more than I can say about what happened afterwards.

The trouble began around three in the morning. The ceremony – the first Jewish wedding in the town since the Inquisition, and almost certainly the first wedding in the town in which the godfather of the groom was black (in this case, Barry Gordy, the founder of Motown Records) – had been beautiful and moving. My best-man's toast, vast quantities of Champagne, and the dancing of the hora – during which a German friend, a direct descendent of the man who'd once tried to assassinate Hitler, was heard shouting "Shalom!" as the frenzied crowd tossed a chair containing Christine's terrified

Norwegian mother straight up to the ceiling – were all hours past. Those of us still fervently celebrating were out on the dance floor. Barry Gordy was our god now, Marvin Gaye His messenger, and Motown our accepted religion. I was more than a little drunk and missing a tuxedo button.

In the noise and dim light, Josh came over to where Aleksandra and I were dancing. With him was a handsome young Spaniard with dark curly hair and smoky, bored eyes. Shouting to be heard over the music, Josh introduced his friend as Cayetano Ordonez, grandson of the late bullfighting legend.

“Cayetano’s the one organizing the bullfighting tomorrow!” Josh shouted in my ear. “His father was killed in the ring when he was small!” And then, turning to Cayetano, he pointed at me and exclaimed the fatal words: “John’s my best man!”

“Ah, *Best Man!*” said Cayetano in heavily accented english. He took a step closer and now his eyes were twice as smoky as they’d been and not bored at all. A movie star’s idea of a matador, I thought. And though in theory his greeting had been cheerful enough, there was something in its aggressive delivery – a chest-poking challenge – that gave me pause. My sweetly accumulated state of inebriation was in jeopardy. This guy in the tight pants (and they *were* tight) meant me no good.

“So, Best Man, tomorrow you fight the bull?” The tone was rudely skeptical.

“Absolutely!” Josh answered for me. He was as least as drunk as I was.

Just then a weaving conga line of wedding guests went by, pulling us into its wake. There was barely time, as I went dancing on my way, to catch Cayetano’s disgusted eye, which plainly declared: *Best Man is Barry Manilow. Best Man is not matador.*

Who was I to argue? I went to bed shortly before sunrise, a grateful man in my wife's arms. Something I hoped to do again and again during all the nights of an extremely long and full life. But when I awoke foggy-headed around eleven and called Josh's room, I found that God, or Barry Gordy, had not complied with my wishes. After four straight days of rain, the sun was finally out. And in half an hour a chartered bus was leaving for the bull ring – not the famous ring in town but a smaller, shabbier one in the suburbs, where not even the Cronista would be present to record my bloody, ignoble end.

The about-to-be-married are not the only people with ebullient fantasy lives, of course. I myself have been known to privately spin ludicrous mental narratives now and again. Often (and studies suggest this may be typical of my sex generally) a grand arena of some sort is involved – Yankee Stadium, say, or Madison Square Garden. A game-winning play by me is not out of the question. My wife tolerates such ridiculousness, I suspect, not because she believes me capable of extraordinary athletic feats but simply because she loves me.

That love was much in my thoughts as I stood on the terrace of a run-down *finca*, overlooking the bull ring. It was a bowl of light-colored dirt perhaps a hundred feet in diameter, encircled by an eight-foot-high stone wall. The wall was crude, and tall enough to lend the central part of the ring the sunken, claustrophobic air of a two-bit coliseum at the outskirts of a forgotten Roman outpost.

The bartender, as if reading my thoughts, refilled my sangria glass on his own. Aleksandra quietly suggested that if I really was going to fight a bull, maybe I shouldn't get plastered first. I nodded and swallowed half my drink. All around us were old friends from college, new friends from Spain, lovely people with whom I would have enjoyed growing old.

I was contemplating my need to urinate when Josh and Cayetano appeared. It was time to view the bulls.

Aleksandra took Josh aside. With a steely smile she said, “If anything happens to my husband, I’ll kill you.”

“Don’t worry,” Josh said, but for the first time all day he looked nervous.

“And you,” she murmured, kissing me. “How about leaving some sperm in a glass for posterity?”

We’d been talking about having children one day, making babies. But now?

“Not sure that’s physically possible at the moment, Sweetie, to tell you the truth.”

Cayetano stepped forward. “Ready, Best Man?”

In the daylight his eyes looked like nuggets of topaz. And his pants, impossibly, were even tighter than I remembered; yet he moved with the lithe precision of a trained killer. I tried to hate him but had too much else on my mind.

About twenty of us walked down to the ring and around it to the paddock behind. There, through the bars of a metal gate, stood four Spanish bulls, the first I’d ever seen in person. These, Josh had assured me, were “small, young” bulls – a mere 500 pounds, 4 or 5 feet tall, with horns not long but still lethal. They were more likely to trample and batter you than to draw blood. That was the upside. The downside was that they could be quicker than their 1100-pound big brothers. One Spaniard, no doubt trying to be helpful, had told me a story about an esteemed bullfighter who’d been killed by a small bull in a ring not unlike this one. After a routine pass the animal had turned with such speed that the overconfident matador was caught still flourishing his cape. The crowd let out a gasp as with one scoop

of the bull's powerful neck the man was flipped high into the air. Then there was just the crack of his back being broken.

The bulls I saw now were black and unmoving. Their stillness, however, appeared to have nothing to do with calm. The lead bull kept his head to one side, a single fathomless eye trained on us the entire time we were there. He seemed, without doing anything in particular, enraged by our presence.

"Nice doggy," I heard someone mutter.

"This way," Cayetano said. "Josh and Best Man first."

He led us back to a pair of tall gates that opened into the middle of the bull ring. Slowly, with a groaning of steel, the gates opened, and we stepped onto the broad circle of sand and earth. A stirring roar went up from the crowd, almost two hundred strong, that had gathered around the rim of the stone wall.

Our group of would-be conquerors began to wave and pose for our wives and girlfriends. The cheering grew louder.

"It's just like *Gladiator*," observed a guy behind me.

"Call me Minimus," I said.

Beside me, Josh blew his new bride a kiss. I tried to smile bravely. Then Cayetano ordered us to divide ourselves behind four wooden barriers, about five feet high by four feet wide, that stood on each side of the ring, close to the stone wall. Each barrier could shield five people at most. We did as we were instructed. It was, to date, the only instruction any of us had received concerning what we were about to do. I found myself next to Josh, facing the paddock. The barrier was made of plywood, cheap and flimsy. My 90-pound Bouvier could have knocked it over. By now the crowd's cheering had died down.

I noticed for the first time in the ring with us three overweight, middle-aged, Spanish men in brightly colored bullfighting regalia, who'd been hired

to assist us in our romp with the bulls, and to step in should anything go seriously awry. From what meager pool of applicants they had been picked I could only wonder. In physiognomy and exhausted demeanor they reminded me of the washed-up security guards who used to patrol my boarding school campus. The fact that they were dressed in fuchsia silk and apparently wearing toupées did not increase one's confidence.

We were positioned. An ominous silence descended. Then suddenly from behind the ring there came a deep bellowing roar and a clanging of hooves against metal. A moment later, the gate to the paddock was opened from within.

For a second or two nothing happened. The world was pleasantly still. Until a black horned locomotive with legs came charging out of the emptiness toward Josh and me. It was surreal, like something out of *Beowulf* – the world silent except for the pounding of hooves and a vicious snorting. The bull came straight at us. His speed and his unbidden rage were the most shocking things about him. Just before crashing into our protective wall, he veered off 90 degrees and headed for the next target.

I can't speak for anybody else who was present, but I felt my fear mostly in my feet. It is my belief that when terrified the heart drops to the lowest point in the body. This is just a theory, but my doctors, who are very expensive, assure me that there may well be some scientific basis for my observations.

Two or three times the bull circled the ring, charging at anything that moved. Every so often, one of the silk-clad security guards would half-heartedly poke a small cape out from behind a barrier and jiggle it, and the bull would go for the scrap of colored cloth at 35 miles per hour, his horns missing the plywood by no more than an inch.

This strange dance went on for a little while. And then Cayetano stepped out into the ring.

Oh, he was good, I'll grant him that. Old Smoky Eyes was a natural, born to the ring. The cape was pink and yellow and four feet across and he handled it as though it were no bigger than a handkerchief, a cloth trophy, flourished for our delight and edification. For a couple of passes he led that bull by the nose, their bodies literally brushing against each other as one charge and then another ended with the animal's mounting frustration. And each time, Cayetano would raise his noble chin to the cheering audience like a magician who's just performed the impossible.

The bull, however, was quicker than expected, and none too happy.

It's an ambivalent relationship you have with your torturer. Was I sorry to see Smoky Eyes upended, to see him backpedaling madly, his hands gripping the bull's horns, as he tried to keep from being trampled? Well, no, I wasn't. But at the same time I understood that, with regard to my own fate at least, I was witnessing a bad turn of events.

After a humiliating scramble, he righted himself, and with furious dignity performed three more passes. But in the eyes of the crowd he was finished.

Next up came Josh, who, in black jeans and denim shirt, perhaps looked more Beverly Hills than matador. (My Polo sweater wasn't exactly the ticket, either.) Bravely he picked up a different cape from the one Cayetano had used – smaller, red, and fan-shaped, the cloth battened in the back by a metal sword that on occasions more serious than this one, could be used to kill a bull. With slightly mincing steps, Josh strode toward the beast, who, snorting and panting, was taking a breather in the middle of the ring.

The bull stood there, eyeballing his new opponent. And then Josh, his face wind-tunnel white, tentatively wiggled the cape in front of his body.

Seconds later, he was staring in apparent shock at his thigh, which had just been brushed by a large, charging animal. The realization that he

was unhurt, and that the bull was now behind him, lit him up as only courage can. He grinned. The crowd went wild.

But if history tells us anything, it is that confidence in the hearts of men usually leads to trouble. As best man, I take some responsibility for what happened next. I should have called out to him, something wise and to the point, like: *Hey! There's a reason there are no Jewish bullfighters!* But worry had turned me mute. I was no good to my friend when he needed me most, and I am sorry.

After two more successful passes (these far more artful than the first), Josh turned to the raucous throng and raised his arm, Maximus-style – a grand gesture which brought them to fever pitch. He was still hamming it up for the ladies when the bull, halfway across the ring, decided he'd seen enough.

Geometry was never my best subject in school. But I could imagine these two fast-moving objects – my friend and the bull – as the arms of an isosceles triangle being drawn in the ring. Bullfighting can be beautiful like that, I suppose, if you happen to be observing it from someplace far away; someplace, say, like Cleveland. Up close in Ronda, however, what I saw was not geometric perfection but Josh, with his red cape tearing toward me at a truly impressive clip, followed closely by the bull. He came barreling into the already congested area behind our protective wall just as the bull went thundering past, missing him by a foot. At the same instant I felt a chill, a stiletto-like rattle, along my ribcage, disturbing my sweater and sending a convulsive shiver up my spine. As if in slow-motion, Josh and I looked down: the sword fixed to the cape was buried in the stone wall behind me.

We raised our heads and stared at each other for a long time. What was there to say? My friend had come within a half-inch of turning me into best-man kebob.

It seemed no one else in the arena had noticed my near-death experience, or cared. Certainly not old Smoky Eyes, who suddenly reappeared at my side, more bitter than ever.

“Ready, Best Man?” he said, in a voice loud enough to be heard by my deaf grandmother in Hawaii.

“You don’t have to,” Josh offered in a low voice, clearly trying to assuage his guilt over nearly impaling me.

Before I could respond, a couple of hecklers began to chant, “Best Man! Best Man!” Soon the entire crowd had joined in.

“Why not go together?” Cayetano said, as if the idea had just occurred to him. “Best Man and Josh. Same cape.”

What Smoky Eyes neglected to say was that tandem bullfighting with rank amateurs is even more dangerous. Unfortunately, I didn’t know this at the time.

I looked at Josh.

“It’ll be safer,” Josh assured me.

I believed him.

Together, in small shuffling steps, we made our way out into the ring. He held one side of the pink-and-yellow cape, I held the other. The bull, meanwhile, was positioned fifteen feet away, staring at us implacably. Since most of our energy was being channeled into monitoring the beast for any sign of movement, we stayed very still ourselves. The crowd began growing restless. Our pride was on the line. Nothing was happening so we began to wiggle the cape. We were still wiggling it when the bull charged.

One thing I discovered: there’s not much thought involved in moving out of the way of a rampaging bull. I stepped to my side and Josh stepped to his; the bull plowed through the cape and the empty space where we’d just been. We were trying to get the bulky cape straightened out when the bull whipped around, charging again. I stumbled and fell to one knee, which led

to my second major discovery: intense fear is like helium. I levitated back onto my feet. This time as the bull went between us, I felt his warm bulk against my leg.

A long pause then. By this point I'd say we were all a bit overstimulated. The bull was breathing in heaving snorts, as well as urinating prodigiously (something I wouldn't have minded doing myself). In addition, he seemed, disturbingly, to be directing his Hannibal Lecter gaze solely at my lower extremities.

It was then, underneath the sounds of general encouragement coming from the crowd, that we heard the beginning of an urgent, faintly garbled chant – led, it sounded, by our wives:

“GIVE...JOHN...MORE...CAPE! GIVE...JOHN...MORE...CAPE!”

We looked down. Josh, in his rabid enthusiasm, had bunched 90 percent of the cape in his fists, leaving me with hardly enough for a pink loin cloth. Beneath it my legs protruded like drumsticks.

Once again, we stared at each other.

I snatched at the cape to cover my legs. The movement caused the bull to charge. Without a moment to reflect, Josh and I, like two mad synchronized swimmers, broke apart, let the bull thunder between us, then turned and came back together again.

We managed three more successful passes, but I hardly remember them. When you're out in the ring – if you're a raw recruit like me – there is no world except the bull, who for long, deceptive stretches stands before you like some stuffed carcass in a taxidermist's shop. And you stare at that large, strange, lethal sculpture with such intensity it's as if you were trying somehow to bring it to life, make it move, despite your fear. Then, all at once, it bursts into motion – oh boy, does it – and you are still staring at it, though now with an urgently different agenda, trying to will it back to sleep, rob it of

the life you have just given it. Until, suddenly, it's past you, and so emboldened are you by the experience, so high on adrenaline and the unexpected realization of your own courage, that it's all you can do to keep from bowing to the cheering crowd. (You can almost see yourself in those tight pants.) The thrill, of course, is entirely retrospective, which makes it mostly a matter of relief. But what sweet relief it is.

Josh and I did not have to confer on this point; we were alive, and knew not to push our luck. We backed slowly away from the bull, never taking our eyes off him. The loud applause from the crowd (did they think I'd forgotten their heckling?) was punctuated by several moist, exhausted snorts from the animal, who obviously no longer considered us worthy of pursuit.

Hands reached down to help us scale the wall: we were safe. Josh and I looked at each other and grinned.

Our wives found us. Christine held Josh at arm's length, as though debating whether to kill or hug him. In the end, she hugged him. And Aleksandra, for her part, seemed to feel that now – right now – after my improbable survival, might be a good time to start making that baby.

Unfortunately, such business would have to wait. Over the next hour, we watched a parade of wedding guests venture out to face the bull. One over-zealous Spaniard was trampled, back and forth, a couple of times. His raven-haired wife was sitting near us, and let out a snort of annoyance.

"There goes the left one," she muttered.

I asked what she was talking about.

"The last time he fights a bull, he loses all feeling in the right side of his ass," she explained. "Gone. Now it's the left side. So his whole ass will be dead. Is he sitting or standing? He won't even know!" She shook her head in exasperation, as the bull gave her husband one last stomp. "I mean, I ask you: Have you ever seen such a foolish man?"

"Never."